

## **14 paragraphs on an informal learning experience with Robert Heinecken**

1. When I was studying photography in college at UNM in Albuquerque (from 1977-1981) Heinecken's phrase 'There is a vast difference between taking a picture and making a photograph' was on the lips and minds of so many students that it was a mantra. And it was a great mantra to have. It taught us to value hard work and a critical eye.
2. The legendary story about him at UNM in those days is that he exhibited a series of photographs that were not put in the fix bath. By the end of the exhibit all the pictures turned dark. It was a rebellious act for a photographer to do and we loved the spirit of that. It was 'Far Out!' We also loved his work for his willingness to use anything from magazines to old glass negatives to fashion new pictures while commenting simultaneously on issues of the media, appropriation, and culture.
3. I saw him lecture at UNM in Albuquerque three times. The first time he lectured using found pictures from a photo processing business. He talked in a very professorial way and compared the snapshots to historical photographs. The crowd loved it and it was a humorous lecture. It was packed too. I did not get it. I had yet to learn Photo History.
4. Most of the photography professors were mellow people who avoided military service. They did not smoke cigarettes. Heinecken had been a Marine pilot and smoked a lot of cigarettes. He had that Marine confidence coupled with a sense of humor.
5. I read all of his books-the book 'Heinecken' by James Enyeart with a extended interview was very valuable. Heineckens' approach and his willingness to ask hard questions of his own work and the very medium of photography were very inspirational. His comments on photography and poetry intrigued me to study poetry more and to think poetically about photography.
6. His second lecture that I attended was of his recent work. He showed slides of the HE/SHE pictures with accompanying text. It too was a packed lecture with plenty of people standing on the sides and in the back. His slides were shown on the wall and he read the dialogue in a slow measured pace in his rich voice. The lecture -with his compelling photographs and the rich dialogue that he narrated remains as a strong memory of how an artist can fashion and invent new powerful connections with their work.
7. His 'Untitled Article' I discovered in my last year of college. Good thing too. It was a succinct and detailed essay on the importance of learning formally and informally, learning art history, the emergence of style, the importance of exploring and mastering a medium, and the possible intersections of the artistic vocation and making a living. It was rich. I read it once a year for many years and it helped keep me focused and balanced as I negotiated the world beyond school as I developed as an artist.
8. I sought out his photographs in the Print study room at UNM. (They will pull just about anything in the collection for anyone to look at-for free.) His photograms and

lithographs featuring TV imagery were compelling, whimsical and surreal. Up close you get a sense of how subtle his work is and of the deftness of his hand in making his work.

9. I met him once. Before his last lecture at UNM in 1999 I asked him to sign one of his books that I owned. I thanked him for his work that inspired me for decades. He listened and we chatted a little. He was genuine and friendly and even offered me one of his Marlboro cigarettes. I took it. He thanked me for talking with him.

10. His lecture that followed highlighted his recent work at the time-enormous collages of Shiva and other Hindu deities fashioned in his unique way. As always-his work was experimental . It had been 20 years since I had first seen him lecture and found him to be just as engaging. He had mellowed and was more subtle. He was still a pioneer and had a sense of graciousness. When I got home I placed his cigarette in a place of honor in my studio.

11. A friend of mine did some house sitting for Heinecken and his wife Joy. The sign in his studio read 'Never Stop Working'.

12. On the day of his death I went to the opening of a local photography show by Jyl Kelley. The show was brilliant and innovative. She had studied with 2 of Heinecken's students- Patrick Nagatani and Joy Neimanas. I was witnessing a kind of lineage at work. Heinecken-Nagatani-Neimanas-Kelley all working with and questioning the medium of photography. It was a sad day yet it was a good day. The work there had seeds planted long ago by the great teacher and artist Robert Heinecken. The teachings had been carried by different teachers throughout the decades and now they were carried by a new teacher and artist named Jyl Kelley. That night on the back porch I smoked the cigarette he gave me 7 years before.

13.. His final work of art was to have his ashes poured into Salt Shakers with the title 'Robert Heinecken Residual Reality' on them. These were then distributed to friends, family and colleagues. It reminded me of the funerary practice in the East where cremains are poured into a river. In this case-the river was people.

14. I never studied with the man but I learned a lot from his work and reading about his life. Heinecken referred to this as informal learning and that makes me, I suppose, one of his informal students. I am fortunate to have learned something from him. I pass out his 'Untitled Article' to my photography students so they too can be his informal students. I also encourage them to make a donation to the Heinecken Memorial Fund at UNM.

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**Sources:**

Heinecken by James Enyeart, Friends of Photography 1980

Untitled Article by Robert Heinecken, Exposure, 1977